Peter Madden revives the tradition of the still life to comment on our fragile relationship with the natural world. The 17th century European tradition of still-life painting is also known as nature morte, which translates as ‘dead nature’. In these paintings, insects and butterflies were often shown alighting from ripe fruit or flowers in full bloom. Their presence communicated, in a poetic manner, the transience of life and the inevitability of death and decay. Madden reinvents this tradition of memento mori using found objects and discarded printed materials to comment on contemporary life and death, and on our environmental impact. In *Butterfly bones* 2007, brilliantly coloured butterflies spring from the ends of blackened branches, which in turn grow from larger bone-shaped branches. The large branches are crossed to resemble the crossbones found on pirate insignia. Skull and crossbones were common memento mori carved into British gravestones in the 16th and 17th centuries, later adopted by pirates to represent lawlessness and rebellion. Today it is common to see skull and cross bones on all manner of things from children’s clothing to video games. This idea of piracy helps us to interpret Madden’s work. The butterflies in *Butterfly bones* have been cut and recycled from a book titled *Butterflies of the world*. On the one hand, Madden can be seen as a pirate who rob images from one context and uses them in another. He chooses the butterfly because it embodies nature is hijacked by collecting*. Madden critiques collecting and the museum, but he also celebrates the resilience of nature to be reborn out of death – the butterfly is the perfect symbol of this renewal.

Activities

- Make your own still life by assembling ephemeral materials that degrade over time. Document the decay of your artwork using drawing, photography and/or video.
- Brainstorm all of the associations with the words *Butterfly bones*. Make your own artwork using found materials inspired by this title.
- Create a visual or concrete poem in which you shape words to create a Gothic symbol.
- List all of the contexts in which pirate symbols or references are found in popular culture. How might you account for the popularity of the pirate in contemporary times? Why do you think pirates have lost their subversive appeal?
- Look for other artists in neo goth: back in black who have an environmental message in their work. What ideas or processes do they have in common with Peter Madden?
- Research other artists who use found materials to make artworks. You might like to start by looking at the work of Peter Atkins, Lorraine Connelly-Northey, Rosalie Gascoigne, Fiona Hall, Linde Ivimey, Donna Marcus, Wanatah Lahy, Madonna Staunton and Hossein Valamanesh. Which of these artists have an ecological message in their work?